

Trinity Sunday
June 15, 2003
Romans 8:14-17

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Welcome to the Family of the Triune God

1. We are the sons of God
2. We are co-heirs with Christ
3. We are led by the Spirit

NIV Romans 8:14 Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

Some years ago, in an effort to improve my understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, I bought a book on the subject. It was written in the 19th century by a Church of England bishop. The book was entirely orthodox and filled with Scriptural proof passages for the various aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. But it was also, I would have to say, rather cold and sterile. It read like a legal document.

Books like that have their place. The confusion and false teaching about the Trinity have to be countered in precise and organized fashion. But in today's epistle lesson, we find the apostle Paul teaching the doctrine of the Trinity in a different way. Rather than seeming cold and sterile, what we read here about the Holy Trinity is a warm and encouraging picture of family relations. What the apostle emphasizes here is how we relate to the three persons of the Trinity. St. Paul is saying to us here, **Welcome to the Family of the Triune God!** In this family we are 1] sons of God, 2] we are co-heirs with Christ, and 3] we are led by the Spirit.

1. We are the sons of God

No two families are the same. Some families are for the most part nurturing groups of loving believers selflessly helping each other on the way to heaven. Other families are broken-down, dysfunctional, leader-less, purpose-less groups characterized by fear and despair. And then there's everything in between. So what's the spirit in the family of the Triune God? Paul says here, "*For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of (or a spirit of) sonship.*" The family of the Triune God is not a place of fear.

That's both reassuring and amazing. By rights we all ought to be living in perpetual fear of God. We ought to be like Adam in the Garden, trying frantically to hide from the God we've offended with our sins. We ought to be like Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Coming into the presence of God ought to leave us overwhelmed at the knowledge of our unworthiness: **"Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."** (Is. 6:5)

But it's not that way. In God's family our status is not that of frightened slaves but that of dearly loved children. The spirit is a spirit of sonship. How did that happen? By pure grace. By pure undeserved love on the part of God the Father, through faith in Jesus. St. John says it this way in the prologue to his Gospel: **"Yet to all who received him (Jesus, the Word), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."** (John 1:12-13) We were not by nature God's children. By nature we were lost and condemned sinners. But God in mercy adopted us as his children. He sent Jesus to shoulder the load of our sins and to die on a cross. He raised Jesus to life again so that we, too, can live, now not in fear but as the beloved members of God's family.

And with that changed status comes a great privilege. Paul says, *"And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" Abba* is the word that a Jewish child in Paul's day would have used to address his father. It is simply the Aramaic word for father. We know from Mark's Gospel that *Abba* is also the name by which Jesus addressed his heavenly Father. When Jesus was praying in Gethsemane, he said, **"Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."** (Mark 14:36) As the adopted children of God, we can speak to God in the same way. We can call him "Father" and approach him with boldness and confidence because through Jesus we've received a spirit of sonship, not a spirit of fear.

Families that function the way God intended are places of sharing. Such families share more than a common name or a home or an address. They share possessions and food. More than that they share God's wisdom and the good news of his love for us in Christ Jesus. The family of the Triune God is a place of sharing, too. God shares his estate with us. Because we are the children of God, we are heirs. And we share an inheritance with Jesus Christ, our brother.

2. We are co-heirs with Christ

It says here, *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."* When Paul says here that we are "co-heirs" with Christ, it's the only time the Bible uses that word "co-heirs." In the opening part of Hebrews it says of the Son, **"In these last days (God) has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things."** Now put that together with what Paul

says here about our sharing Christ's inheritance. It's like Paul says in another place: **"All things are yours...the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."** (1 Cor. 3:22-23)

Of course, we want to be careful not to equate ourselves with Christ. He's God—uncreated, eternal, incomprehensible, as we confessed in the Athanasian Creed. We're not. We're creatures—and sinful creatures at that. But by God's grace and through faith in Jesus we have this additional privilege of being the heirs of God and—amazingly—co-heirs with Christ.

The Bible speaks of this inheritance of ours in various ways. It says in Colossians that God the Father has "qualified" us **"to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light."** (1:12) Peter says it's an inheritance kept in heaven for us, an inheritance that can never **"perish, spoil, or fade."** And Paul says here in Romans that this is an inheritance of glory, that in heaven we'll share the glory of Christ.

He wants us to know, however, that while we're still here on earth, there's something else that we share with Christ. *"...if indeed we share in his sufferings."* The servant is not above his master. If the gracious, life-giving ministry of our Master, Jesus, was met with opposition and characterized by suffering, we ought not to expect that our lives as his disciples will be different. In fact, our suffering for the name of Christ is a strong indication that we are his disciples. That's what happens to disciples. They suffer for the name of their Lord. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, for whom the creed we recited earlier is named, was actually more closely connected with the writing of the Nicene Creed, which defended the true deity of Christ from false teachers like Arius. Arius contended that Jesus Christ was not God in the same way that the Father is God. So what did Athanasius get in return for his staunch defense of the Bible's truth about Jesus? He got exiled. He got banished from his parish, not once but several times. He was told you can no longer serve as shepherd of these people. He suffered. And we will too, if we dare to speak up for the truth about Jesus.

So who would want to follow Jesus, then? What kind of recruitment pitch for Christianity is this? "Become a Christian and suffer." But bear in mind that's not the whole message. The passage says, *"If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."* Yes, there is inevitably the suffering, but there's also the inheritance, being co-heirs with Christ and sharing his glory in the endless joy of heaven.

It seems to me that in families that stay together, there's someone who expends the effort to see to it that the family stays together. There's someone who hosts the family gatherings at Thanksgiving or Christmas, someone who plans and works to carry out the family reunions. Maybe there's also someone who works

at keeping track of the family tree or researches the genealogy. In the family of the Triune God, it's the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, brings us together in God's family and keeps us there. We are led, Paul says, by the Holy Spirit.

3. We are led by the Spirit

At the beginning of this section we read, "...because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." People who are led by the Spirit of God are by definition sons of God. We are probably more accustomed to naming Jesus as our leader. We sing, "Jesus, Lead Us On." Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leads us beside quiet waters. But if it were not for the Spirit's work, we would not know Jesus as our Leader or our Savior or our Lord. The Bible says, "**No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.**" (1 Cor. 12:3) Unless the Holy Spirit leads us we wouldn't understand that we are God's children. But, it says here, "*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*" It's only by the Spirit's leading that we come to see our desperate state on account of our sins, and only by the Spirit's leading that we come to confess Jesus as our Savior from sin. As the *Small Catechism* says, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel..."

That little phrase "by the gospel" is an important one. While there's much about the work of the Holy Spirit that's mysterious—in our Gospel lesson Jesus compared the Spirit to the wind that blows wherever it pleases—one thing is abundantly clear from Scripture. The Holy Spirit is pleased to do his work of gathering and preserving the family of the Triune God through the Means of Grace, that is, through the gospel in Word and Sacraments. The Spirit works through the preaching and teaching of the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection. The Spirit works as we bring our children to baptism, as we go back to the promise God gave us in baptism when we confess our sins and seek his forgiveness, and as we come to Holy Communion and receive the assurance that our sins have all been forgiven. That's how the Spirit leads us, causing us to daily put to death the misdeeds of the body, repenting of our sins, and asking God to forgive us for Jesus' sake. Then the Spirit leads us to serve God and obey his commandments not in the fear of punishment, but in joy at our identity as members of the family of the Triune God.

There is no doubt that the doctrine that serves as the theme for this Sunday of the church year is an impenetrable mystery. How is it possible for the true God to be three separate persons and yet one God? It can be stated simply, but fully comprehending what we're stating is not possible. Yet that's what the Bible says and not in a cold and sterile way, but in a warm and encouraging way. As believers in Jesus Christ we can say, "Welcome to the Family of the Triune God!" In this family we are the sons of God, we are co-heirs with Christ, and we are led by the Spirit. What a great thing it is to be members of this family! Amen.